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AESTHETIC THEORY AND EDUCATION

by

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The relevance of aesthetic theorizing for humanistic education appears to be commonly conceded. However liberally construed, humanistic studies uniformly display recognition of the need for pursuing and justifying the sharpening of perceptual skills, the shaping of critical distinctions and the discrimination of aesthetically exemplary objects.

So much seems unexceptionable. But we must pay, sooner or later, for the comfort these lofty aims afford. For in granting the relevance of aesthetic theory to our educational goals we provoke an avalanche of philosophical questions. And it is one of the merits of Professor Beardsley's paper that he confronts us with so perspicuous a view of both the significance and the complexity of these questions. Indeed, Beardsley's paper, like his problems, is rich, convoluted and provocative. But perhaps we can extract one or two issues for a closer look.

Beardsley asserts that "What is needed to ground aesthetic education is a general way of looking at the arts." And he adds that "The sort of philosophical principle I have in mind would say what basic category works of art generally, or characteristically, or at their best, belong to—what is to be looked for in any work of art and can probably be found, at least in some degree."

Now, such general ways of looking at the arts have usually been, or become, embedded in *theories* of art, as in familiar versions of the Imitation, Representation and Expression theories, all of which in large measure satisfy Beardsley's criteria for the sort of thing that he argues is needed to ground aesthetic education."

But several difficulties are immediately apparent. If aesthetic education must be grounded in some such theoretical structure, what are the pedagogical consequences of picking a false or inadequate theory? Is the theory itself to be subjected to confirmatory or falsifying encounters through its heuristic applications? And we may wonder, in the light of the dismal history of aesthetic theories to accommodate either the scope or the evolution of art forms, whether we can reasonably argue that "a general way of looking at the arts" is a necessary foundation for aesthetic education, since that would seem to imply that either there has been no aesthetic education or that it has thus far been inadequately grounded. Is it reasonable then to hope that with the failure of Imitation, Representation, and Expression theories of art the Semiotic theory, even with Goodman's extensive refinements, will fare any better here? More radically, we may nourish doubts about the very possibility of a single structured and coherent way of looking at the arts that will not prove fatally Procrustean as a "foundation" for aesthetic education.

An astonishing truth about the art world is that the public, critics, and artists themselves often continue to dwell in the ruins of demolished theories.

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Most notably, in our time, the Expression theory, whose inadequacies have been persistently exposed in the philosophical literature, continues to show signs of being alive and well in the pages of (*inter alia*) The New York Times and the Musical Quarterly. The painter Hans Hoffman talked to his students like the formalist one would expect him to be, but he reverted to the formulae of art-as-expression when forced to discuss his work with journalists and other laymen. Yet other artists, as their statements attest, have consciously espoused and worked under the influence of theories of art. What then are we to make of all this? If an artist produces a work while in the throes of a theory, are we to take the work as *exemplifying* the theory? Or shall we insist that what artists do and what they think they are doing are, for aesthetic theory, mutually irrelevant?

These are (or ought to be) familiar problems and I will make no effort to unravel them here. Rather, the point I want to press is that the relation of artistic activity to aesthetic theory and thus, obliquely, to aesthetic education remains perplexing and obscure. Theories are not only *imposed* upon art and education as meta-critical structures, they are also *embedded* in those activities where their causal influence is enmeshed with other strands. (Consider the parallel manner in which theories of historical determinism have themselves become operative in the mechanisms of historical change).

In light of these considerations, we should perhaps question the wisdom of resting our hopes for the successful development of artistic or aesthetic education on the viability of particular aesthetic theories. Theories, after all, have replaced one another with distressing regularity, while artistic ability and aesthetic discrimination have continued to flourish and even to survive the more radical shifts of established paradigms of artistic significance.

Let me suggest an analogy. Modifying Beardsley's suggestion slightly, we obtain the following proposal for education in the sciences: 'What is needed to ground scientific education is a general way of looking at the world.' And the sort of philosophical principle involved would, analogously, involve notions of (say) substance, causation, and events, concerning which both ontic and formal commitments must be made. But the objections to this position are transparent. For, as Goodman has effectively reminded us, there is no single *way* the world is, and thus no privileged general way of *looking* at the world. True, there are competing 'general ways of looking,' but these are invariably metaphysical structures and, as such, inappropriate as foundations for scientific education. Conversely, models of scientific activity that *are* appropriate are open to scrutiny from within the sciences, and the critical assessment of such models is itself a part of scientific education, not something external to it. Analogously, if the critical assessment of competing theories of art is an integral part of aesthetic education, such theories cannot then stand as *external* foundations of the enterprise. If there is no clearly privileged way of looking at the world, even less can there be a privileged way of looking at the arts; and I would urge that the role of aesthetic theorizing is not to "ground" educational policies and procedures but rather to provide model structures to enable us better to develop critical and cognitive responses to our aesthetic experience.

II

Since critical assessment of aesthetic theory is something that Professor Beardsley does so persuasively in his paper, I want to turn to a few questions generated by his discussion of Goodman's version of what Beardsley calls the semiotic theory of art, by which he means ". . . the categorization of works of art as, in the broadest sense, signs—that is, carriers of meaning and/or reference." Additionally Beardsley notes that "The art that has always been the most troublesome for any form of semiotic theory is the art of instrumental music."

What evidently makes most instrumental music so refractory for a semiotic theory is its resistance to symbolic or referential interpretation. A great many predicates of course attach to such art works, literally and metaphorically, but it requires additional and perhaps suspect assumptions selectively to transform possession into reference. Yet that is precisely what Goodman's view requires.

The underlying requirement (for Goodman) is that for art to have a significantly cognitive import it must be a symbolic activity, and to be genuinely symbolic an art work must perform one or more of the various referential functions: description, representation, denotation, exemplification, or expression. There will be little argument that the first four of these are modes of reference, so let us concentrate on expression. Expression, for Goodman, is metaphorical exemplification, viz., if an art work expresses ϕ , then it (metaphorically) possesses ϕ and refers to the label ' ϕ ' (Cf. p. 95LA). Suppose for example that a particular work, say Delius' *A Song Before Sunrise* could be said to be (metaphorically) nostalgic. Is it also then expressive of nostalgia? On Goodman's view it must not only metaphorically possess the relevant property, it must also *refer* to the label denoting that property. How then do we determine whether this referring function is satisfied and, consequently, whether the work *is* expressive of nostalgia? And here, where one might expect further criteria, Goodman issues a flat disclaimer that "No test for detecting what a work expresses has been sought here: after all, a definition of hydrogen gives us no ready way of telling how much of the gas is in this room." (p. 95,LA)

But this comparison is misleading. A definition of hydrogen is at least relevant to the construction of tests for its presence, but Goodman's account of expression gives us virtually no help in distinguishing cases of mere metaphorical possession of properties from a full-blooded expression of them. Again, suppose the Delius piece to be metaphorically nostalgic. Does it express nostalgia? Only if it also refers to the label 'nostalgia.' But what determines that? Should we listen more carefully to the work? Is there perhaps something we've overlooked? No: clearly this is absurd. There is nothing in the set of phenomenal properties of the work that will disclose the presence or absence of referential relations. And Goodman offers no hint of semantic rules or regularities that would indicate the existence of such relations. Presumably, not every property that is metaphorically possessed by an art work is also expressed by it. But since Goodman's theory provides no way of distinguishing cases of possession-plus-reference from mere possession, it leaves us with a vacuous distinction. (Nor will it help to be told that wherever there is expression there is reference, for what requires ex-

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plication here is not reference but expression.) And in the absence of independent reasons for maintaining the distinction, reliance on the requirements of a disputed theory is not sufficient.

(It is worth remarking, in passing, that it is curious that so consistent and rigorous a nominalist as Goodman should feel constrained to argue for the inflation of our talk about art with a plethora of referential relations, some of which at least are disposable in favor of more semantically economical alternatives. As Beardsley points out, it is not clear that Goodman's "Exemplificational Theory" has any conceptual advantages or educational consequences that are not available in views that can dispense with the cumbersome requirement that art be always symbolic and referential. And accounting for the expressive qualities of abstract instrumental music remains an instance where the thrust of Occam's razor cuts against the grain of Goodman's argument.)

III

Since I suspect that Beardsley would agree with many of these comments--these as opposed i.e. to my earlier remarks--let me get on to some final musings about education.

Pursuing one of Beardsley's suggestions concerning the expansion of choice-worthy alternatives through the activity of artists and performers I want to plead briefly for a somewhat neglected aspect of aesthetic education--neglected, as you will see, because of its apparently reactionary implications.

Beardsley is quite right of course to point out that "[artists and performers] have contributed to the potential freedom of humankind, in one of its most important dimensions: I mean the range of choice-worth things the world affords." But it would be wrong to infer that this expansion of freedom is distributive--that it means that there are no, or ever lessening restraints on what we can or ought to make of particular art works. Stravinsky once remarked that the most difficult decision he had to make when beginning a new work was not directed to what he would do, but to which among the available possibilities he should eliminate. The "freedom" of his artistic choice was then often equivalent to the necessity to restrict the range of live options. Stravinsky was neither unique nor peculiar in this. Such constraints are pervasive, and are characteristic of artistic activity; and there is every reason to insist that comparable constraints are essential to effective critical and appreciative response.

Not everything is an appropriate response to *King Lear*, or to *Bluebeard's Castle*, or to *Clockwork Orange*. In aesthetic, as in moral education, possibilities abound for logically and emotionally inappropriate attitudes. Just as there are occasions of guilt, resentment, and indignation that are unapt, unjustified or inappropriate, there are judgments of taste and responses to art works that are analogously misguided, and an approach to aesthetic education that would aim at generating a fondness for or an "appreciation" of art through the encouragement of unrestricted response to it is as invidious as an educational psychology that aims at inspiring respect for other persons without regard for the quality of their actions or their moral character.

To insist on this point is, of course, but one more way of arguing for the

indispensability of cultivating cognitive abilities through our acquaintance with the arts. The view is understandably unpopular, since it places discipline on a par with intuition, thinking on a par with perceiving. But the alternative is not a rival theory aesthetic education, but no aesthetic education at all.